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ABSTRACT

A study abroad program in Jordan has been run by Ambassador University (Texas) for the last 15 years. During this time, nearly 150 Ambassador University students have participated in a work-study program in Amman sponsored by the Ambassador Foundation. During their stay in Jordan, the students teach Jordanian students with physical and mental disabilities at one of three special education centers. The 20 students selected annually for the program are prepared for their teaching responsibilities by taking special education and conversational Arabic courses. Returning students have commented on how the exchange program has affected their lives and changed their outlook toward people of other cultures. (MDM)

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THE IMPACT OF A STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM IN JORDAN ON UNDERGRADUATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

Today, there is an increasing interest in university study abroad programs. Studies have shown that these programs can provide lasting benefits to the participants. This article discusses the effects of Ambassador University's work/study program in Amman, Jordan.

The Impact of a Study Abroad Program in Jordan on

Undergraduate University Students

Studying abroad is perhaps the single most enriching experience a college student can have to broaden his or her international and intercultural awareness. An estimated 100,000 American university or college students annually spend a semester or a year studying abroad. A National Task Force established by the Association of International Educators, the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEF), and the Institute of International Education (IIE) suggests that by the year 2000, 10 percent of all American college and university undergraduate students will have a significant educational experience abroad (Burn & Smuckler, 1990).

Willis and Enloe 1990 cited the UNESCO principles that describe what can be achieved through global educational: (1) an international dimension and global perspective, (2) an understanding and respect of all peoples, their cultures, civilizations, values, and ways of life, including domestic ethnic cultures and cultures of other nations, (3) an awareness of the increasing global interdependence between peoples and nations, (4) the ability to communicate with others, (5) an awareness of the rights and duties incumbent upon individuals, social groups, and nations, (6) understanding the necessity of international solidarity and cooperation, and (7) a readiness on the part of individuals to participate in solving the problems of their community, country, and the world at large.

A major goal of study abroad programs is to provide students with the opportunity to grow and mature both in experience and intelligence (Juhasz & Walker, 1988). Studying

abroad has been found effective in giving students an opportunity to enrich and diversify their formal education. Students can learn valuable life lessons by simply living and learning in a new cultural and social environment. For many students, studying abroad stimulates a new perspective of the world and a greater awareness and appreciation of their own culture. Most students returning from study abroad programs express a sense of personal empowerment and independence from the overseas experience. They gain strength, character, and confidence that can carry over into their personal and professional lives throughout adulthood (Hansel & Grove, 1986).

University study abroad programs also enhance the employability of the participant. Many potential employers look favorably at applicants with international work/study experience. In today's globalized economy and job-market, potential employers see applicants with international work experience as being an especially valuable asset. Many study abroad programs offer internship components in the university curriculum in which students can earn college credit while working in volunteer service overseas. These types of programs can directly prepare students for the global marketplace. It is estimated that by the end of the 20th century, it will be difficult not to be involved in the global marketplace wherever one works and whatever one does. Thus, more and more employers are becoming aware that students with international experience possess many of the qualities necessary to compete in the new evolving global community. (Hoffa & Hoffa, 1996).

The Ambassador University Program in Amman, Jordan

The Ambassador University Study Abroad Program has been involved in Jordan for the past fifteen years. During this time, approximately 150 Ambassador University students

have participated in a work/study program in Amman, Jordan sponsored by the Ambassador Foundation, a cultural and philanthropic organization affiliated with Ambassador University. During their stay in Jordan the students teach Jordanian students with physical and mental disabilities at one of three special education centers: (1) the Young Muslim Women's Association (YMWA) Center for Special Education, patronized by Princess Sarvath of Jordan. This Center provides pre-school, elementary, and vocational education to children with mental disabilities between the ages of four and seventeen. The Ambassador students work as teacher aides in various classrooms such as art, woodworking, drafting, and physical education; (2) the Hussein Society for the Physically Handicapped, patronized by Princess Majda of Jordan. The children attending this Center are typically between the ages of five and twelve, have an assortment of physical disabilities, and receive occupational-therapy and physical-therapy. Ambassador students at this Center work as occupational, physical, and hydro-therapy assistants; (3) the YMWA Sheltered Workshop for the Handicapped at Sahab. This Center is an adult sheltered workshop providing adults with mental and physical disabilities employment opportunities in woodworking, drafting, electrical, and other vocational opportunities. Ambassador students working in this Center work as shop foremen and supervisors to the Jordanian workers.

The twenty students selected annually for the Jordan work/study program are prepared for their teaching responsibilities by taking education classes such as Children with Mental Disabilities, Children with Physical Disabilities, Teaching Techniques, and two semesters of Conversational Arabic. Along with the education classes, several seminars on Jordanian history, politics, culture, and religion are presented before their departure. We

find that these classes and seminars adequately prepare the students for work in the Special Education Centers as well as dealing with the political, economic, and social issues in Jordan.

Students participating on the Jordan work/study program have many opportunities to travel, interact with Jordanian citizens, and meet government officials. Each year, the Ambassador students in Jordan are invited to the Royal Family's Palace to meet Her Royal Highness Queen Noor. Each student is presented with a gift from His Majesty King Hussein, a "Longines" watch with the crown insignia of Jordan on the face. Ambassador students consider this the highlight of the work/study program. While in Jordan, the Ambassador university students are also provided with many opportunities to visit Egypt, Israel, Syria, Petra, the Red Sea, and many other Middle Eastern landmarks.

Students' Reactions

After returning to the United Sates, the Ambassador University students were asked to write a short essay on the effect the Jordan work/study program had on their lives and to explain how it changed their outlook towards people of other cultures. All of the students expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to work/study abroad and mentioned the positive effect it had on their lives. Several of the students expressed a desire to work overseas again after graduation. The following are a few excerpts from their comments:

"It has definitely helped me come to appreciate the uniqueness of individual cultures, and the qualities that these cultures bring out in their people. Living in a third world country makes me more empathetic to the situations of those people. It's one thing to hear on the news about how Iraqi people are suffering, and it's a complete eye opener to actually

visit an Iraqi refugee family living in Amman, and struggling for daily survival. It changed the way I look at the world. Before I lived in Jordan, I must admit, I had no idea about the differences in how people live. Not only do I appreciate the world differences now, but I appreciate the smaller differences more in those who live around me here in the United States. I realize now that no matter how different people's lives appear, we all have the same physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual needs."

" Being overseas for a year really helped me to realize how good we have it in America. It also helped me to see the richness that can be had in relationships with people of different cultures and how ignorant it is to separate yourself off from others. Some people tend to make problems out of non-issues, and when you have seen the true problems that people face in other countries (i.e. war and the lack of food and shelter) it really puts life in perspective to see how good we have it here in America."

"First of all, I would say that I went over to Jordan to touch as many lives as I could, and I did. What I found though was that in return my life was touched. Being overseas made me see how lucky and blessed I am to be an American citizen. No one else has the opportunities we do. The majority of the world looks up to us and strives to be like us. One thing for sure, once I saw an American flag at the New York airport, I was very glad to be home."

"I found my experience of working in Jordan to be mind-expansive; that is, I now see the world in much broader terms. I was content to live in my own little world and satisfied with my lifestyle the way it was before living in the Middle East. After returning from Jordan, my problems seem so peripheral in comparison to the issues concerning the average

Jordanian citizen. I don't complain as much about my own problems as I once did. I have considerably more empathy for the needy, and I don't brush off any responsibility I have as a Christian to give food, clothes, and shelter to those in need. I don't take the simple things in life for granted the way I have in the past."

"One major area of change is my outlook on the world. Until you actually get to know people who live a substantially different life than you do, it can be difficult to identify with them. Living in a foreign culture substantially changed my outlook on the people of Jordan. I not only met the people but also made some solid friendships, I came to identify with their struggles on a very real level. I developed a much deeper level of empathy than I had only seeing their story on the news. Knowing the Jordanian people on a personal level made their issues real."

"I definitely gained more information about the world, and people are universally the same. I gained a broader perspective and understanding of the background behind why countries and peoples do what they do. Issues are not black and white. I already knew there were more than two sides to every story, but now it is reinforced."

The students' comments support Reghenzani's (1991) conclusions that international experiences foster lifelong values and opportunities like culture sensitivity, social and professional polish, wider personal horizons, and improved career opportunities.

Conclusion

The benefits of study abroad programs are genuine. Returning students often speak of seeing the world from a new expanded perspective. Our returning students are more

adaptable and better able to communicate and think critically. They now see themselves as members of a new global society in spite of any cultural, political, social, or language differences. Experience has shown that students who have participated in our work/study program have learned valuable life lessons, such as patience, kindness, empathy, and an appreciation for people of different cultures. They sense a new level of maturity, empowerment, and independence. In addition, they gain valuable international work experience and prestige that will help them as they enter their future professions.

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